Gary Benz's Sunday night instant analysis column on the Browns is one of our most popular columns, and as he does each week, Gary comes back on Thursday and hits us with some Lingering Items from the win over the Bills, which has the Browns a win away from the postseason. This week, Gary hits on what the adverse conditions revealed about the Browns, the Pro Bowl selections, and the dominant season from the offensive line.

One of the great things about playing a football game in adverse conditions is that it tends to expose whatever flaws your team may have. Indeed, in some ways, adverse conditions can be the best way for a general manager to judge the relative strengths and weaknesses of his team.

Thus, equally as important as the Browns victory Sunday was against the Bills was the fact that it highlighted where both teams need work if they have hopes of becoming among the elite in the NFL. But since this isn't a site dedicated to the Bills, we'll let that team and its fans figure out its shortcomings, but here's a hint: defensive line. Here's another hint: offensive line.

As for the Browns, Sunday's game revealed the same litany of strengths and holes that, frankly, have been present all season. On the plus side, as good of a season that quarterback Derek Anderson has had, his passing success owes a debt of gratitude to the continued threat of a strong running attack, led by Jamal Lewis. Dumping Reuben Droughns, who is now mostly an afterthought with the New York Giants, has turned out to be a brilliant move.

Droughns certainly isn't a bad running back, but he simply never seemed to possess the combination of speed, strength and toughness that made opposing teams respect the Browns running attack week in and week out. I suppose, too, that it's a fair point that Droughns ran behind an inferior offensive line while in Cleveland. But there's no question that neither Denver, which did have a good offensive line and from whom the Browns acquired Droughns, nor general manager Phil Savage felt that Droughns had that "it" factor, even if running behind the kind of line Lewis now has.

But Lewis is a much different story. Even before coming to the Browns, he had compiled enough credentials to qualify him as an elite back. But the way he was seemingly cast aside by a Baltimore Ravens team desperate for offense fed the common perception that Lewis was an "old" 28 years of age whose better days had passed. In fact, the whispers were that Lewis had basically turned into a back like Larry Brown, the former Washington Redskin from the early 1970s who was a Pro Bowler three of his first four seasons. At that time, Brown seemed well on his way to a Hall of Fame career, but just as suddenly fell off the map as the result of all the hits he had taken during those early seasons. He had been prematurely beaten up and rendered ineffective.

What the Bills game proved in particular and the season has proven in general is that Lewis is far from being done as a running back and is, indeed, with the season he's put together this year is unquestionably a legitimate Hall of Famer when his playing days do end. The conditions on Sunday begged for exactly the style of running that Lewis has perfected. The fact that he delivered so impressively leaves no doubt that teams cannot simply key on one aspect of Rob Chudzinski's offense. In other words, the Browns already clearly have a playoff-quality offense.

The defense, though, is a much bigger story. The fact that Marshawn Lynch had 82 yards rushing wasn't much of a surprise for two reasons. First, the Bills mostly ran until the last drive. Second, it's not as if the Browns defensive line has been able to really stop anybody all year anyway. On the year, they are giving up over 128 yards rushing per game. Saying, again, that the defensive line needs to get fixed is as obvious as noting that there are some parental issues that need to be

addressed in the Spears family.

But a disturbing trend of the last few weeks most certainly was how the defense, collectively, seemed to nearly fall apart with the game on the line against beaten teams with inferior offenses. Both were remarkably similar. Two teams that hadn't been able to do much over the course of 55 minutes suddenly turned into the New England Patriots in the last 5. Passes suddenly got completed, running lanes opened and the defense seemed helpless, missing tackles and blowing coverage.

It's too easy to simply conclude that a lack of talent is responsible and time to focus at least some attention on defensive coordinator Todd Grantham. The schemes he's calling late in the game, which feature three down linemen rushing and maximum protection back in order to stop big plays, aren't working. By getting absolutely no pressure on the quarterbacks, even the likes of Kellen Clemens can eventually find someone breaking open. And when you get to the playoffs, the quarterbacks won't be stiffs.

But if this trend continues, the only real hope that the Browns have of advancing in the playoffs is if they are clicking on offense and doing just enough on defense to keep the game from getting out of control. Unfortunately, of the potential teams they might meet in the playoffs, all have defenses that are in the top half of the conference, which makes that a difficult task. Further complicating it is the fact that the converse is true as well; of the potential teams they might meet in the playoffs, all have offenses that are in the top half of the conference. In other words, this is the time of year when the biggest flaws get revealed. The Browns lack of balance between offense and defense is *the* threat to whatever comes next.

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In case anyone was looking for additional reasons why at least one if not more of

the Browns offensive linemen should have been in the Pro Bowl, consider how little Anderson has been sacked. He's started 14 games and played half of another and has been sacked only 12 times. That ties him with Drew Brees for the least sacked starter, just ahead of Brett Favre.

Plenty of credit for this goes to Anderson because of his quick release. The ability to make a decision quickly is the key to avoiding sacks. Quarterbacks looking to always make the perfect throw tend to find themselves picking themselves up off the turf more often than not. For proof, look no further than Charlie Frye. In one half of one game, he was sacked five times, with the same offensive line that has basically kept Anderson's uniform clean all season.

But as much and probably more credit for the lack of sacks goes to the offensive line. If not for Frye's five sacks in the first game of the season, they would be tied with New Orleans. Yet, no offensive lineman from the Browns made the Pro Bowl while Alan Faneca will start at guard and Jonathan Ogden will start at tackle. Clearly, those are reputation picks because the performance this year is clearly lacking. Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger has been sacked an astounding 43 times, second most only to Jon Kitna in Detroit, while Ravens quarterbacks have been sacked 35 times. It's always difficult, of course, to really know how well an offensive lineman is performing. But this certainly looks like a good place to start looking.

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While were measuring the effectiveness of the Browns offensive line, take note of the story in Wednesday's USA Today where Sean Leahy writes that 60 different players have started at quarterback in NFL games this year, the most in the 32-team era. The Browns contributed to that statistic when they sent Frye off to Seattle to carry a clipboard, but that's misleading.

Most of the changes that have come across the league relate to injuries, naturally.

The rest relate to ineffectiveness. Ultimately, though, it all traces back to the offensive line. When your quarterback isn't constantly being harassed, he's less likely to get injured. And if he's not getting harassed, he has a decent chance to be effective. It's really a pretty simple, tried and true concept, which has taken the Browns only about two decades to learn.

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Proving that players can learn from other players, the kneel down by the Eagles Brian Westbrook at the one yard line late in the fourth quarter Sunday against the Dallas Cowboys demonstrates clearly that sometimes scoring isn't always the right play. Indeed, it almost cost the Browns against the Jets.

As I noted last week in the Jets edition, the chaos near the end of that game was due, oddly, by Jamal Lewis' terrific 31-yard touchdown run. Had he not scored but rather been tackled after gaining the first down, the Browns could have run out the clock since the Jets were out of time outs.

The exact same scenario developed in Dallas. Westbrook, like Lewis, broke through and was headed for a touchdown. But instead of scoring, he dropped to the ground at the one, allowing the Eagles to run out the clock because the Cowboys likewise had no time outs.

It was a heady play by Westbrook, no doubt, but that doesn't mean that Lewis made a bonehead play either. Given how the defenses were playing in both those games, a touchdown at that point, with just over a minute left, should have closed out the game anyway. The fact that the Browns defense fell apart, while predictable in theory, didn't seem possible in context. Live and learn.

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Proving that coaches don't learn from other coaches, in that same game Eagles coach Andy Reid called a time out to determine whether or not he wanted to challenge a play. He did and lost. Two time outs blown. Fortunately, it didn't cost his team like it did Browns head coach Romeo Crennel. Live and don't learn, I suppose.

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Questions to ponder: Why is Rich Rodriguez, who ran out on his team, his alma mater, with a BCS bowl game to play, not being raked over the coals in the same way as Bobby Petrino?

The New York Yankees on Tuesday fired traveling secretary David Szen. Does that mean that George Costanza will finally get the promotion he's so richly deserved?